Couch menace mastered by 'combined operation'

Frank Sykes (left) with Plant Protection's local Development Officer, Douglas Evans.

Most farmers concerned with continuous cereal growing face the problem of grass weed competition. In fact it's a problem that has increased enormously over the last decade or so.

THE MODERN METHOD
Today, an effective and time-saving method of grass weed control has been devised by Mr. Frank Sykes, CVO, at his Tytherington Farm, near Warminster.

Mr. Sykes farms 2,500 acres of his own and is also an agricultural consultant. He has been a well known writer on farming subjects for many years and is a practical agriculturalist.

THE TECHNIQUE
Mr. Sykes took the first step towards devising the 'Tytherington technique' a few years ago when he heard of a new and quite different non-residual weedkiller – 'Gramoxone.'

At that time, Plant Protection Ltd., the ICI company which developed 'Gramoxone,' held a demonstration in the South West area, which Mr. Sykes attended. Like every farmer, he was facing rising overheads and decreasing cash returns. So an innovation which promised to reduce the cost of any farming operation was worth looking at.

He was particularly interested in the ability of 'Gramoxone' to deal with grass weeds, because in changing over from the old farming pattern to continuous cereal growing, he found that couch and blackbent (*agrostis gigantea*) had begun to build up alarmingly in his crops. So he faced lower yields not only as a result of the weed competition, but also because of the diseases they harboured.

Deep ploughing was no answer on his light type of soil. But after seeing 'Gramoxone' at work, he began to realise that the solution might lie in a 'combined operation' using this chemical and cultivations.

THE BASIC STRATEGY
Mr. Sykes experimented along these lines, bearing two radical ideas in mind, that he had discovered from experience. First, *couch and agrostis are by nature shallow-rooted weeds.* Left to their own devices, their roots grow fairly near the surface and only when they are ploughed under will they become a deep-rooted problem.

Secondly, *the weeds' rhizomes must be kept on the surface if they are to be treated effectively.* Couch and agrostis are weakened by having their roots continually torn from the soil and exposed to the air and frost throughout the winter. When better weather dries out the soil, the rhizomes are already in a weakened condition after their winter exposure. When they are kept on the surface and shaken out of the frost tilth by harrows, they can be finished off effectively. Ploughing them under has exactly the opposite effect. It protects them from frost exposure so that in the spring they begin to grow up through the furrows. Cultivations bring some to the surface, but obviously they leave a great many more still buried.

USING THE CHISEL PLOUGH EFFECTIVELY
The tool used by Mr. Sykes to loosen the rhizomes and bring them to the surface was the chisel plough. And this is where 'Gramoxone' proved invaluable. If the grasses make a great deal of green growth above ground, they quickly collect round the tines of the chisel plough and slow down the whole operation. 'Gramoxone' was the answer. A spray killed off the top growth and the chisel plough was able to move through quickly and easily and bring the rhizomes to the surface. They lay there, exposed to the weather, throughout the winter.

TIDINESS DOESN'T PAY
At this stage the weeds lying on the surface looked messy and the field hadn't the tidiness of one that's been ploughed. But though weakened by exposure, the weeds weren't dead yet. When the soil dried out in the spring, they were shaken easily from the frost tilth and exposed to wind and sun. This completed the kill.

After two seasons of using this technique, Mr. Sykes found that his weed problem had shrunk remarkably. And once a field was really clean, he found that with the help of 'Gramoxone,' he could reduce vastly the number of cultivations needed to maintain it in that state.

In fact, on some soils and where the farm is clean, a wide cultivator could replace the chisel plough. Two or three passes with this, followed by some harrows to destroy volunteers, leave a field in condition for the drill and real savings in cost can be achieved.

OTHER TECHNIQUES
Mr. Sykes has welded 'Gramoxone' into a system to deal with weeds in varying circumstances.

He uses it to get rid of the sown grasses completely when switching from ley to cereals. Then he gets a really clean start to the rotation.

Again, Mr. Sykes has found that a spray with 'Gramoxone' after harvest makes stubble burning far more efficient. If the weeds are growing green between the straw swathes, they stop the fire spreading. But 'Gramoxone' applied at two pints an acre desiccates them within a few days. Then they burn easily, bridging the gaps between the straw and making overall burning possible.

'Timeliness' is another feature of 'Gramoxone' exploited by Mr. Sykes – particularly when dealing with couch and agrostis. He 'freezes' them by killing off the top growth with 'Gramoxone' until he can get around to them with the chisel plough. This also prevents the rhizomes from building up food reserves in the interval.

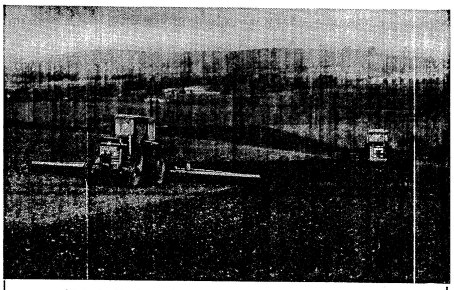
THE CHEMICAL CULTIVATOR
So, on his own farms and elsewhere where he is consultant, Mr. Sykes has used 'Gramoxone' as a vital part of his farming system. As a 'chemical cultivator', in fact, and the best one to use in specific circumstances.

And this is how 'Gramoxone' should be regarded – as a farming implement in chemical form with a permanent place on every farm alongside such everyday implements as ploughs and harrows.

THE FARMING PARTNERSHIP
'Gramoxone' is just one of the Plant Protection products developed with the object of helping every farmer to produce more – profitably. Plant Protection research is continuous and exhaustive. Laboratory tests are followed by stringent tests in trial plots. Then in close co-operation with farmers, further tests are carried out in the field. Only then is any new product put to commercial use.

These activities form a partnership between farmers, agents and Plant Protection with the one object of making farming easier and more profitable for all concerned.

And the vital links are the Plant Protection development officers and representatives – all technical men out in the field every day. Their help and advice is always available.



Minimal cultivations—a harrow covers one of Mr. Frank Sykes' fields, followed by the seed drill.

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